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A blank check with no maximum limit

Even in these days of \$230 billion federal budgets and \$27 billion federal deficits, \$579 million is a lot of money.

It represents about \$11,000 for every man, woman and child in Danbury.

One would expect that when Congress votes an appropriation of \$579 million, it would know what the money is going for.

But in the case of the current Defense Department budget, it does not.

That \$579 million fund is the last item on the table of aircraft procurement requested by the Pentagon for fiscal 1972 and is identified merely as "classified projects."

Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, the only senator who is a member of both the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committee, suspects this is one of the hidden items to cover intelligence funding, for the CIA and for other intelligence operations.

But the Pentagon won't admit it is, nor will it say it isn't.

Senator Symington, a former Air Force secretary, has been on the Armed Services Committee for the past 20 years ranking immediately behind the chairman in seniority. Not once has he or the full committee, let alone the entire Senate, been informed what hidden funds are included in the defense budget for intelligence operations. During this period, U.S. intelligence operatives have been credited with or blamed for U.S. involvement in affairs of foreign countries, including the secret war in Laos.

Senator Symington last week tried to put a limit on the blank check Congress provides for intelligence operations. He offered an amendment to the defense appropriations bill to put a \$4 billion lid on the blank check.

He didn't ask that the budget provide a breakdown of the \$4 billion, nor that secret material be revealed to the Senate. He just wanted intelligence funding limited to intelligence, so we don't get into another situation where U.S. personnel are organizing and running a war on foreign soil, and an airline to go with it, without Congress or the American taxpayers knowing about it.

Unfortunately, only 30 other senators joined Senator Symington in voting for the amendment, so the intelligence operatives not only continue to have a blank check but one without limit as far as Congress is concerned.

The usual Pentagon supporters in the Senate won this round. But the questions Senator Symington and others raised about U.S. military and intelligence officials involving this country in distant wars cannot be hidden away like the \$579 million appropriation.

Sooner or later, the administration, the Pentagon, the CIA and others involved will have to face up to these questions. As far as taxpayers are concerned, the sooner the better.